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Humanities Course In General Education

(The following informal but meaty report of a symposium at the Rocky Mountain meeting has been prepared from notes supplied by the Chairman, Prof. George McCue, Colorado College. See, also, a quotation from **Cooperative in General Education** at the end of this report.)

General Statement

Why is it that music can boast to be an international language? The pure scientists, too, insist that they speak a common language of ideas and contents. Why don't we have separate compartments in arts and sciences, such as French Music, German Music, Spanish Science, American Science? Are there no common denominators in literature that would enable us to speak a common language as in science and in art?

I am clinging to the belief that the foreign languages and literatures can be denationalized. All the elements in literature can be humanistic values purged of nationalism. I am convinced of the need for a core of concepts which will make us aware. I am not arguing for a Great Books Course but for a Great Concepts Course. Solid, civilized content can make our languages more effective and help to prepare our students in thinking, and thus contribute to the general education.

STUART CUTHBERTSON,
Univ. of Colorado

University of Denver

Our cultural heritage course traces the contributions of each great civilization in all the arts and sciences and other phases of living which contribute to good and enjoyable living. The staff is drawn from six different departments of the University. Visual and auditory aids are employed. The museums and art galleries, local concerts and radio, and services of religious organizations in Denver are drawn upon for illustrative materials. This course has been developed over a period of seven years and is still developing. We have a schedule that maps out week by week a five hour course program. We lean on aids that are customary. The text is CIVILIZATIONS: PAST AND PRESENT. This is the backbone of the course, but we depart from it when we think it necessary. The first quarter is devoted to ancient times from the beginnings to the Middle Ages. The second quarter, the Middle Ages to the Renaissance to 1800; and the third quarter, the 19th and 20th centuries. We have included the Oriental Cultures along with the Western World. We are open to the charge of superficiality in the field of Oriental Culture, but we feel it is better to start than to have nothing. In the past lies the beginning. The technique is to have each of our six instructors a specialist: one from music, one from fine arts, one from philosophy, one from religion, one from theatre and one from literature. We meet weekly and exchange experiences. Our students are in groups of 30 to 35 in which we have no formal lectures, but discussions.

LEVETTE DAVIDSON

University of Arizona

The course at Arizona was begun 14 years ago with 250 students in the first year. Now we have about 900 students and I think 19 people teaching sections in this course. We began the course with a minimum of theory. We began with the assumption that a brief recapitulation of the development of the culture of the Western World would be of benefit to individuals. A slight acquaintance with the great monuments in literature and the other arts might help the student to become a whole person—to quote Emerson. We had a committee to frame the first program. It was composed of representatives of the Classics Department, the Spanish and French Departments, the German Department, and the Literature Department. The works selected were chosen on various bases. One of the primary ideas was: has this work any contemporary interest? Is it of any value now? We believe that a great work is always great. We considered the literary forms also and we teach those literary forms. We noticed that in such courses as the survey of English Literature the job was almost hopeless. We all agreed in the beginning not to do it that way. We decided to select a comparatively small number of significant pieces. We used to have a great number of reserved books in the library for this course, but we had to abandon that because of the number of students. It wasted the students' time and stocking the reserved shelf was impossible. We are using two or three anthologies — we are not satisfied with the one we are using. It includes English and American selections.

There is a good deal of machinery. We have an executive committee and this settles what it can settle. We have meetings of the entire staff. We used to have meetings weekly in which we tried to set up the objectives for the coming week but we abandoned that procedure. We keep together pretty well because of the mimeographed syllabus and the uniform examinations we give and by one general lecture given to this group of 900 weekly besides the three meetings a week. Three or four examinations per semester are given. The course tries to limit the number of authors and to give a fairly large reading from each author selected.

We begin with Homer and used to read most of the Odyssey but now we read only a couple of books of the Illiad. We read three or four Greek plays and we turn to the culture of Rome. The authors that we read there are Virgil and Lucrecius. We try to integrate the arts with the literature. We do not include music. That was an arbitrary decision.

We have specialists in all the things we teach. We sometimes found that the best scholar in a field was not the best lecturer. We study this whole development by periods—the most significant and beautiful, if possible. We trace philosophy. We show what was going on in art and architecture and the relationship of principles that govern those arts. We get some objections from members of the faculty who say that the course is unreasonable in difficulty. But it is not. We fit the gar-

(Continued on page 2)

Appointment Bureau

Registrants with the Appointment Bureau range from inexperienced M. A.'s and fledgling doctors to experienced teachers with impressive records. Chairmen and Deans are invited to make use of the Bureau's services; there is no cost to them. Members will please remind the appointing officials of their colleges that the Association maintains an Appointment Bureau.

A Program for Composition

(A paper read at the Chicago C.E.A. meeting, Nov. 28, 1947)

If you are a representative group, there are among you about five teachers of composition for every teacher of literature. Of the five there are four who think of their positions as being vaguely dishonorable and look forward to the day when somebody or other who teaches the period courses they want will depart. There are four who have in the backs of their minds a scheduled program that runs something like this — to teach composition for two more years; if at the end of that time they are nominated to teach Professor Windymere's course in Balto-Slavic prosody, they will ask for promotion; if the request is granted, they will stay where they are; if it is not, they will depart to become the pundits of a selection of rural colleges. There they will write significant books.

These four dreamers are only partially responsible for the stereotype which rules them. It has been forced upon them by certain assumptions ingrained in policies and conditions which have controlled instruction in composition ever since students appeared on college campuses in large numbers. It would be easy to blame "the administration," whatever that is, and exonerate the teaching profession; but it would not be just or fair to do so. Those teachers who have retired into the higher brackets have defined the job, and the juniors have accepted the definition. They have agreed to the conception of themselves as golden personalities, destined for a brief term in composition, after which they will retire as a matter of course to a sort of year-round Yaddo.

It is because of this conception of the pedagogical career that composition is taught badly, by a group of egregious transients who work sixty hours a week for a salary that their elevator men would scorn.

It is useless to talk of improving instruction in composition or of improving the conditions under which composition is taught so long as the course is an intellectual slum. The remedy lies in a theory which I should like to advance, namely, that the principal busi-

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OTHER CASES

If you've heard this one, stop reading now. It's about the Dean and the Chairman. The Chairman wanted to make an appointment. The Dean wanted to be convinced.

"Why," said the Chairman, "this man's one of the very best in his field. He wants to come here, and his field is the only one we're weak in. We've got to have him if we're going to be a well-organized department."

"Reminds me of a story I heard about the Army," drawled the Dean. "Seems there was a trainee who told the sergeant he felt bad. So the sergeant sent him over for sick call. When he got there, the trainee walked into a room that had two doors on the other side. The door on the right had a sign over it, "Stretcher Cases", and the one on the left had a sign, "Other Cases". The trainee figured he wasn't a stretcher case, so he went to the left, into a long corridor. At the end of the corridor were two more doors and two more signs. The sign on the right said, "Infectious Cases", and the one on the left said, "Other Cases". The trainee went to the left again, into another long corridor. At the end of this corridor were two more doors and two more signs. The one on the right said, "Serious Cases", and the one on the left said, "Other Cases". The trainee went to the left again, and found himself outside on the parade ground.

"When he got back to his barracks, the sergeant yelled at him, 'Hey, did they fix you up over there?' 'Can't say as they did," mumbled the trainee, "but they've sure got a damn fine organization.'"

HUMANITIES COURSE—

(Continued from page 1)

ment to the wearer. We grade on the curve and do not fail more than 12% of the entire group. The lower two deciles are pretty much lost in our course. However, students we meet three or four years after they have taken the course frequently tell us how important it was to them.

MELVIN SOLVE

University of Colorado

The faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences at Colorado passed an entirely new curriculum about two years ago, requiring a 24 hour course in science, 15 hours in social science, and 15 hours in the humanities, but allowing the student to skip the courses which are in his major field. He can take the required courses at any time in the four years. The Humanities Course is now being planned and the plans are not very far along. We hope to take off with five or six courses next fall. We believe that literature has to be the backbone of such a course. The course shall embrace the Departments of English, Modern Languages, Philosophy, and Fine Arts. Colorado is pledged to the idea that the same instructor carries the students all the way through. We are pledged also to the idea of non-completeness. We have to select certain cultural areas, probably Hebrew, Greek, Medieval, Renaissance, and American. We shall make no pretence at giving students "world literature".

DUDLEY WYNN

Motivation

(In this connection, some sentences are interesting from **Cooperation in General Education.** A Final Report of the Executive Committee of the Cooperative Study in General Education, American Council on Education, 1947, pp. 107-110. The statements quoted are "Possible Implications" of a wide survey of student opinion on novels. Those interested in General Education will wish to read the whole report; teachers of English will find Chapter V, on the humanities, provocative. The selections below are from that chapter.)

"Students tend to read what they find at hand . . . One can scarcely overemphasize the role accessibility seems likely to play in determining students' reading. An obvious implication for education is that the colleges whose departments of literature are interested in developing a different taste in literature among their students must do what they can to overcome this difficulty . . .

"The sort of motivation which led students to read the best-sellers is very clear . . . In part it is the appeal of the social or snob value of this reading . . . To be sure, the advocates of the 'great books' have succeeded in certain circles in making this type of reading honorific. Others interested in changing the type of material commonly read must make the same effort . . . For those who accept the present emphasis on best-sellers, this motivation can be a powerful aid. Those who wish to change the type of material face the problem of redirecting this pressure . . .

"(Students like the best-sellers because) most of them are 'good stories,' with considerable action and 'interesting' characters . . . Many will insist that these values can be obtained from 'better literature.' The significant fact is that these students are apparently unable to find them there . . .

"Students also believe they get ideas and information from fiction . . . chiefly best-sellers —or . . . magazine fiction. (But many teachers feel that) many of these novels . . . cater to a weakness of all human beings, particularly college students — the desire to feel, without having to go to too much trouble, that they have thought deeply about something important . . . If, say these teachers, students draw ideas from these books, the ideas are probably not good; the novels which would furnish real material of this sort are the hard novels, and often, the unpleasant ones. These are the novels which few students . . . have read—and even fewer liked.

"Whether we should join Plato, Marx, or Tolstoi and insist that fiction should be of moral and social significance is not the issue here. Nor need it be debated whether supplying ideas and information of this kind should be an aim in teaching literature. Whether encouraged or not, students do read for this purpose, and the ideas they obtain from these books may well be of concern to college fac ties . . .

"As has already been poin out, the analytical and criti satisfactions are not very po lar with students. Those wh students attain are the m general and innocuous. On t level, the satisfactions are fered by the best sellers; many of the technical excell cies of these novels often c sidered 'the best' are foreign these students. We can har expect, therefore, for these s dents to read these masterpie

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if they remain blind to many of the values they have to offer. In short, there is an extremely close relation between the reading (primarily the best-sellers) and the kind of satisfaction which students are able to attain."

A Program for Composition—

(Continued from page 1)

ness of a college teacher is teaching, whether composition or physics. On the assumption that there are men who believe in this theory, and that a group of men can be convened who will accept full responsibility for teaching writing over a period of years, it is reasonable to seek improvement in their status. Progress is here, as elsewhere, a spiral affair. A demonstration of genuine commitment on the part of teachers must precede any genuine improvement of their lot; improvement of their lot will, I believe, bring on a number of commitments.

II

The first and most important step to be taken in providing a group of teachers seriously committed to the teaching of composition is to break the pattern of promotions in English. There is no honest way to justify the traditional conditions which apply to every man who wants to advance his career in teaching. There is no reason for judging a composition teacher entirely on the volume of his publications in journals dedicated exclusively to research in literary history.

There are two ways in which the pattern may be broken. The first is by simply making available to teachers of composition as such the full span of rank and salary in the academic community to which they belong. A good teacher should get a good salary, especially if he is a composition teacher. It is possible that he need not be one of that unfortunate group referred to in hard-boiled circles as the "composition bums", men who waited just a little too long for Professor Windymere's courses. Every college should afford enough men of experience and long-continued interest to form the nucleus of a staff for writing (a teaching, thinking nucleus; not merely a group of executive gauleiters), and it should reward the members of this group on exactly the same scale as that on which it rewards men in any other instructional program.

According to a professor of literature I know, any man who will submit to a composition assignment for more than two years is worthy of nothing but contempt. At many universities teachers are limited by statute to about four years tenure at the rank of instructor; at the end of four years, they must go up or out. A combination of the professor's opinion with the statutory limitation results in a peculiar gambit. The normal career for a teacher who got caught in it would be two years on sufferance, two years in contempt, and out. It is not likely that under this system much efficient teaching would be done.

Instructors ought not to have to spend all their time guarding their lines of retreat. Contempt belongs to bad teaching, not to the teaching of any particular subject.

I prefer a system under which men who teach composition well are paid in proportion to their excellence and advanced in the normal way even throughout a long career. Their success need not depend upon doing something else well, something outside the limits of their job. It is particularly important that their success should not depend upon their doing well some one particular thing outside the limits of their job.

One of the handicaps under which composition courses are conducted is a handicap which derives ultimately from historical accident. The composition staff is traditionally regarded as a nether appendage of the English department. Only very superficial examination of graduate courses is required in order to discover that little of the work in graduate English has particular bearing on the teaching of composition. Some English departments have trained their students carefully in rhetoric, linguistics, and grammar, but even they have no wide margin of superiority in this regard over some departments of philosophy, foreign language, history, political science, and mathematics. Logic informs dialectic; dialectic informs rhetoric; and all three together provide disciplines useful to good writing. These matters are taught elsewhere as well as in English. Some graduate English departments do not touch them at all.

As I understand the matter, the objectives of freshman courses in composition do not comprehend fine writing, or creative writing, if you prefer to call it that. They concern rather that level of competence in writing which has to do with logic and rhetoric, a level of competence highly desirable in all other fields of endeavor as well as in the study of literature.

Under these circumstances, I see no reason why the whole of the responsibility for instruction in composition should fall upon the English department. Since I was trained in English literature myself, I feel that people trained in literature know more about teaching writing than people trained in other fields. But I have noticed that my colleagues trained in other fields don't agree with me at all. It is possible that some of them might be very good composition teachers indeed. Certainly the articles in their journals are written no worse than those in

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the **PMLA**; nothing is. They are no worse trained in the grammatical and mechanical concerns of composition teachers than are students of literature, who get no such training after their freshman courses. And there is value for composition staffs in transfusion from new sources of information. The principal gain is the creation of a group with only composition as a common ground, one which therefore identifies itself with composition. A new base, a new center, and an end to aping an inappropriate external discipline—these are all gains.

Another gain, and an important one, will occur with the redefinition of the matter of composition assignments. I mean by matter the subject material about which students write as opposed to the form in which they write and which is ultimately the composition teacher's distinctive concern. I don't want to become involved in a discussion of relative emphasis on matter and form proper to a course in writing, though it is a lively subject. Let us assume that since the students can't write about writing, they must write about something else. Too often the something else is derived from a special theory concerning the genesis of literary works, of Lamb's essays, for example, rather than from the special competence of the student. There have been too many personal essays, summaries of impressions of alma mater, and dull probings into undistinguished childhoods. The subject matter of freshman papers should not be chosen in anticipation of the literary future; it should be chosen with direct reference to the student's highest intellectual accomplishment at present, to the area in which the student is supplied with terms. Many of the textbooks printed during the past few years show that already the field of material judged fitting for assignments has broadened; it is no longer essentially literary in emphasis. A further development is required. The material should not only be expanded beyond the limits of what is primarily literary; it should also be limited to exploit the particular matter of other courses in the college. In other words, theme assignments should be germane to the context of college education. Staffs limited to one field of learning cannot provide assignments of this kind without help.

Everything points to one fundamental administrative change in the affairs of composition staffs. They must be separate administrative units. This is the second way of breaking the pattern of promotion. Personally I see no necessity for calling the new organization a "department of speech" or of "communication," I feel no devotion to complete enumeration of writing, reading, speaking, and listening, or to reeling, writhing, and fainting in coils. It is by this means, however, that in many colleges and universities the separation has already taken place. It is a good thing. It relieves departments of literature of a duty that they don't really want, and it opens to the composition teacher many channels of development that were closed to him before.

Departments of English, in spite of the best of intentions, cannot avoid using composition staffs as big-league ball clubs use their "farms." The way to leave the farm is to move into the parent team. The farm supplies more candidates for each vacancy in the department than can possibly be used; as a result, the humane system of firing everybody every four years or so has come into being. An even more discouraging development of the farm system is that many departments recognizing the general inferiority of the composition staffs they have created, make it a matter of policy never to promote composition instructors, but to fill their vacancies by appointments of somewhat more prestigious personages from other schools.

The effect of this state of affairs is clear. Every incentive is offered the instructor to stop teaching composition. No incentives are offered him for teaching it well.

There is no reason why the administration of a separate and independent composition staff should be at cross purposes with the English department alongside which it works. The farm is still there, if anyone wants to use it, and it may be useful to more departments than one.

HENRY W. SAMS
Univ. of Chicago

(To be concluded in the April number)

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